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ABSTRACT

Freedon of expression, lack of fear of criticism and humiliation, refusal to be content with the most easily established routine, and a spirit of play as well as a commitment to work should be some of the attributes in a creative environment for teaching reading. To create such an environment, the teacher should use the humanistic approach, becoming aware of how children feel about what they learn and accepting the dialect as these learners read, write, and express ideas orally. The teacher should also teach reading in such a way that students can make errors without fear of causing the teacher to "explode," and should help children feel good about themselves by knowing what to say to them when they make errors. (SW)

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CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE TEACHING OF READING

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Does it require a creative person to create an environment for the teaching of reading?

The conditions that make an environment creative have been little studied, but it seems likely that social conditions analogous to those seen in individual creativity are important. Freedom of expression, lack of fear of criticism and humiliation, refusal to be content with the most easily established routine, a spirit of play as well as a commitment to work, purpose on a grand scale - these are some of the attributes that a creative environment may be expected to have.

The purpose of this paper is to turn our attention to the task involved in creating such an environment for reading.

Social psychologists have given some direction in this area. Studies in this field stress social interaction in the classroom, a non-threatening climate, group dynamics and interaction in the teacher-pupil group. Learning to read involves constant interaction between teacher behavior, pupil behavior and group behavior. Achievement depends more upon the interaction of the behavior of those involved in a creative environment than upon methods or materials of instruction.

As previously stated the literature reports very little research on creating a climate or environment for reading. Studies involving the Open Classroom concept seem to be closely related to the topic under discussion.

On March 7th in Berkeley, Missouri, I was privileged to hear Dr. John C. Manning, of the University of Minnesota - major author of the Scott Foresman System, speak to a group of educators. It was inspiring to hear Dr. Manning literally pleading with his listeners to work with children when we assign them material; it gives dignity to the task. The very manner in which a teacher distributes material bears a message, in other words - use the humanistic approach.

Dr. Lyman C. Hunt of Vermont University, a principle author for the Holt, Rhinehart Series and a courier for humanism, spoke at a local council meeting and was asking educators to become aware of how children feel about what they learn.

Vivian Hawkins of Kentucky State University, conducted a Reading Workshop at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, on Dialect and Language Differences of Learners; she brought the same humanistic message, that is, accept the dialect as these learners read, write and express ideas orally. Techniques were given for teaching the Standard English but the stress was on respecting the child and accepting his differences. Do you hear the common thread of humanism in the message from each of these speakers?

As educators concerned with the teaching of reading, we must realize it is how we teach and how we act that may be far more important than what we teach. For instance, let us try to create a non-threatening environment where a child can risk making an error, such as getting the short and long vowel sounds confused without having the teacher explode. A host of lessons are taught every week, less by the content of the reading skills than by the ways teachers and parents behave, the way they talk to children and to each other, the kinds of behavior they reward or punish; these lessons are powerful and often unforgettable.

According to Jerome S. Bruner[1], learning requires the exploration of alternatives. Yet, in the interest of safety and economy, it is not efficient for a learner to explore all possible alternatives in learning, how to do something, or in seeking to understand a matter. In any learning environment there will be determinants that will either encourage or discourage an individual's tendency to explore alternatives. In fulfilling this function of exploring alternatives, Bruner suggests that we minimize errors, therefore minimize the risk attendant upon exploration. The consequences of error should be less stern in terms of physical harm, loss of face, feelings of insecurity, etc., AND, maximize the informativeness of error. For example, provide for corrective feedback immediately, this reduces confusion by giving error information. The relationship between the teacher and the pupil is never neutral in its effect upon the learning atmosphere.

Evelyn Wood[2] of Speed Reading fame said, "It's important to teach people to feel what they read, because then they begin to love reading. A person never gets this kind of feeling just reading word by word. Of course, it's hard to assume you would get emotional about a textbook, but even then you get the ideas and see them in an organizational structure. We want people to feel what they read so that comprehension is a total kind of experience."

Nothing succeeds like success. A learning environment that contributes to each child's success in reading is one in which the child feels good about himself - human beings cannot share and work with other human beings effectively unless they feel good about themselves. If a child misses a syllable in a word, won't you agree that the child would feel much better about himself if the teacher said, 'That's almost right' instead of saying, 'That's

wrong.' Or, if upon completion of correcting a child's paper, the teacher could ask, 'How many did you get right?' instead of, 'How many did you get wrong?'

Are you willing to commit yourself to creating an environment for the teaching of reading where a child can risk making errors, explore alternatives, express ideas in his dialect without fear of humiliation? These ideas discussed in this paper are not new, nor innovative, but the newness and freshness will be manifested when we internalize these ideas and make them a part of our practice. These criteria I hold dear because materials become obsolete, methods become outmoded, techniques are abandoned, but when we have understanding, then all our efforts will become creative.

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